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Student union bans 'racist' sombreros

University of East Anglia student union officials accused of hypocrisy after taking Mexican hats away from new students

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Student union officials at the University of East Anglia have banned a Mexican restaurant from handing out sombreros to students, branding the marketing stunt racist.

The high-crowned straw hats had been given to students at a freshers' fair in Norwich by staff from Pedro's Tex Mex Cantina, a Mexican-themed restaurant in the city.

Union officials took them away from new students, according to reports, and told restaurant workers the hats breached a policy forbidding stallholders from handing out materials including "discriminatory or stereotypical imagery".

They were quickly accused of hypocrisy, with observers pointing out that the union encourages students to appropriate African American cultural tropes at its annual "Pimp My Barrow" event.

Matthew Ward, 27, general manager at Pedro's, insisted the sombrero promotion was meant as a celebration of Mexican culture.

"As we handed out the sombreros we were told it was 'culturally indifferent', which we think is a shame because we are not doing anything to offend and we are just celebrating the culture," he said.

Union officials pointed to a key advertising policy sent to all stallholders before the freshers' fair that bans potentially racist imagery. It reads: "Discriminatory or stereotypical language or imagery aimed towards to any group or individual based on (discriminatory) characteristics will not be permitted as part of our advertising."

The policy specifies 15 types of discrimination, including colour, ethnic origin, and nationality. When the ban was pointed out to workers on the Pedro's stall, they were happy to stop the promotion, according to a report in The Tab, a student newspaper.

The University of East Anglia campus at Norwich. Photograph: Joakim Borén/Univeristy of the arts Norwich

Chris Jarvis, the union's campaigns and democracy officer, defended the ban. He said: "At the student union we want all members to feel safe and accepted, so at all events we try to ensure that there is no behaviour, language or imagery, which could

be considered racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic or ableist.

“At the fair, all our stallholders were sent a copy of our advertising policy prior to the event and were also given a physical copy of the policy on the day, so we’re confident that all stallholders should have been aware of our restrictions on advertising in relation to equal opportunities and cultural appropriation,” he said.

“The company in question was Pedro’s restaurant, and the stallholders stopped once asked and were amicable in ceasing. That said, we know that when it comes to cultural appropriation the issues can sometimes be difficult to understand and many don’t realise that they may be about to cause offence or break a policy.

“So we’re discussing internally how we can improve our briefing to both external organisations and our own members so that people aren’t caught out at the last minute.”

It is unclear how the policy will affect student fancy dress parties or which other hats could be banned.

Some observers on Twitter accused the union of hypocrisy, with one user saying that the university’s annual Pimp My Barrow challenge included a range of entries that could be interpreted as racist, while a second said the barrow event took cultural appropriation to a “whole other level”.

Sombreros are worn in the south-west US and Spain as well as Mexico. With a name that means “shadower”, they have wide brims to shield wearers’ heads, necks and shoulders from the sun.

Early Spanish sombreros had flat tops and wide, flat brims, but these were modified in Mexico with even wider brims with upturned edges and conical crowns. They are generally worn by mariachi musicians and charros, Mexican horsemen.